

SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART

THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

For immediate release

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Diane Arbus: Family Albums

Nationally acclaimed exhibition re-examines photographer's unfinished project, offers glimpse of what might have been

Oct. 16—Jan. 16, 2005

Kress Gallery

MEDIA CONTACT

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PROMOTIONAL IMAGES AVAILABLE (please contact Bill Woodard)

Lawrence, KS—In 1968, three years before her suicide, Diane Arbus wrote that she was compiling her photographs into a “family album,” likening it to a “Noah’s ark” and perhaps imagining in it the people who might be remembered and saved in the aftermath of the tumultuous 1960s. “Family,” in Arbus’ sense, consisted of people held together by all sorts of bonds, some traditional and others alternative, and deserving of special attention.

Diane Arbus: Family Albums, organized by the Spencer Museum of Art and the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, Mass., re-examines Arbus’ never-completed project and offers a glimpse into what such an album might have looked like. The exhibition will be on view in the Spencer’s Kress Gallery from Oct. 16 through Jan. 16, before continuing on to several other venues in its national tour.

The Spencer Museum of Art venue is funded in part by the Kansas Arts Commission, a state agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

Diane Arbus: Family Albums includes a large body of work never seen before publicly and promises to change the received view of the remarkable photographer. Arbus was interested in compiling expansive and metaphorical images of the 1960s family. The exhibition, then, culls from Arbus’ work, as she never had the chance to do, a collective image of the family in a turbulent decade of American history. It presents traditional family groupings as well as

alternative families/communities and “implied” families. The exhibition is augmented with printed materials from the 1960s and a major companion book published by Yale University Press, co-authored by the exhibition’s organizers, John Pultz, Spencer curator of photography and associate professor of art history, and Anthony Lee, Mount Holyoke associate professor of art history. Their book has met with widespread critical acclaim—in December 2003 both *Art and Auction* and *The New York Times Book Review* included it on lists of the best photography books of the year.

The Spencer holdings of Arbus’ work consist primarily of photographs she took for *Esquire* magazine. These prints, many of which are accompanied by related proof sheets, show the photographer’s broad range—and especially her interest in the family. Depicting children, couples, mothers, and fathers, they include public figures with their children (such as television’s Ozzie and Harriet Nelson), and they also picture various people that Arbus fashioned as surrogate families.

The Mount Holyoke holdings result from a 1999 gift from alumna Gay Humphrey Matthaei (class of 1952). The gift consists of a collection of family portraits taken by Arbus in 1969. This cache was only a portion of a much larger body of work. The Matthaei family has a complete set of contact prints of the more than 300 pictures that Arbus took of them. Products of the largest, complete, single sitting available for scholarly scrutiny, these photographs provide an opportunity to explore Arbus’ working methods in ways not previously possible.

The exhibition opened last fall at Mount Holyoke College Art Museum and has since traveled to the Grey Art Gallery at New York University and the Portland Museum of Art, Maine. After its showing at the Spencer, the exhibition will continue on to Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Georgia Museum of Art, Athens; and Reynolda House, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

MORE BACKGROUND:

Arbus, a pivotal and controversial figure in American photography in the 1960s, is well known for her direct photographs of people on the edge of societal acceptance. She was twice a Guggenheim Fellow, and in 1967 she exhibited her photographs at the controversial and influential *New Documents* show at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. After her suicide in 1971, rather than falling into obscurity, the photographer continued to grow in fame and her photographs obtained international recognition. In 1972 she was the first American photographer to be exhibited at the Venice Biennale, and the Museum of Modern Art mounted a major retrospective of her work—easily the most popular photography exhibition since Edward Steichen’s *The Family of Man*.

Arbus acknowledged that gathering pictures for her planned "family album" was like gathering and counting animals for Noah's ark, preserving a mixture of modern American lifestyles before an impending catastrophe. Sometimes this gathering was deliberate, sometimes propitious as she roamed the streets of New York. For example, in 1968 she wrote, "I stopped two elderly sisters the other day and three generations of Jewish women from Brooklyn whom I am to visit soon...the youngest is pregnant. And especially there is a woman I stopped in a Bookstore who lives in Westchester, which is Upper Suburbia. She is about 35 with terribly blonde hair and enormously eyelashed and booted and probably married to a dress manufacturer or restaurateur and I said I wanted to photograph her with her husband and children so she suggested I wait 'til warm weather so I can do it around the pool!...They are a fascinating family. I think all families are creepy in a way."

Related public events include:

- Lecture: Photographer Tina Barney on her work, October 21, 7 p.m. SMA Auditorium. Murphy Lecture Fund. Barney will speak on her photography of families and its inheritance from Diane Arbus.
- Film: "The Royal Tenenbaums" October 28, 7 p.m. SMA Auditorium. (2001, director Wes Anderson, 109 minutes) Rated R.
- Lecture. Curator John Pultz on "Diane Arbus: Family Albums." October 29, 7 p.m., KU Edwards Campus, Overland Park. Pultz is co-organizer of the exhibition, a KU associate professor of art history and SMA curator of photography.
- Tour du Jour: Curator John Pultz, November 4, 12:15 p.m., SMA Kress Gallery.
- Film: "The Ice Storm," November 4, 7 p.m. SMA Auditorium. (1997, director Ang Lee, 112 minutes.) Rated R.
- Faculty Colloquium: "Family, Politics, and Photography of the 1960s." November 5, 10 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. Co-sponsored by Hall Center. The colloquium will be held in the exhibition galleries, which will allow close study of the prints and many contact sheets, and will offer a chance to focus the intellectual resources of the university on the social, cultural, and historical issues that surround Arbus's photography, especially as the photographs relate to issues of the family and social change in the 1960s. The colloquium will include a tour of the exhibition by John Pultz, SMA curator of photography and co-organizer of the exhibition, short presentations by faculty members and graduate students, and a chance for discussion. Faculty and graduate students who would like to share their disciplinary perspective on these or related topics should contact

John Pultz (pultz@ku.edu; 864-0127). Pre-registration through the Hall Center is requested. The colloquium, held in conjunction with the Spencer Museum exhibition *Diane Arbus: Family Albums*, is co-sponsored by the Museum and the Hall Center for the Humanities.

- Lecture. Trudy Wilner Stack on "Fear and Loving: Arbus and Winogrand's New America." November 11, 5:30 p.m., SMA Auditorium. Murphy Lecture Fund. Wilner Stack is an independent scholar and curator.
- Lecture and gallery talk. Professor Anthony Lee on "Arbus, Fashion, and the Grotesque," November 18, 7 p.m., SMA Auditorium. A walk through the exhibition with curator John Pultz will follow the lecture. Lee is co-organizer of the exhibition, and associate professor, art history and American studies, Mount Holyoke College.
- Children's Art Appreciation Class: "Family Photo Albums," December 4, 10-30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. \$. Pre-registration required. Contact Karen Gerety at 864-0137 or kcgerety@ku.edu
- Film: "Ordinary People." December 9, 7 p.m. SMA Auditorium. (1980, director Robert Redford, 124 min.)
- Video: "Going Where I've Never Been: Photography of Diane Arbus." Shown continuously in the SMA Kress Gallery.

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Also find the Spencer...

- On the Web: www.spencerart.ku.edu
- E-mail: spencerart@ku.edu

Gallery hours

Tues., Wed., Fri., & Sat. 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

Thurs. 10a.m.–9 p.m.

Sun. Noon–5 p.m.

Closed Monday

- Free parking in Lot 91 after 5 p.m. on weekdays and all day weekends, excepting home football games.
- Parking garage adjacent to Kansas Union is \$1 per hour weekdays, free on Saturdays and Sundays (but unavailable on home football games).